

Thank you, Mom, for teaching me that I can always find my way back home

By Gloria Golec

Why was my 42-year-old mother going back to high school?

When I was around 12 years old, my mom announced that she had registered for classes at Jones Commercial High.

“Huh?” I replied.

“I’ll be going to school two nights a week for typing and shorthand,” she said. Then we went back to whatever it was we had been doing.

My mother had dropped out of high school after her junior year and started working in a factory. She met my father, got married, had children and was doomed to factory jobs for the rest of her life. Her income was a family necessity.

Several times during my lifetime, I remember she said, “Your father and I worked like animals in those factories.”

She did not say it as a victim statement, but as a declarative fact, like stating she’d gotten over some bad illness. She didn’t say it often, but enough that it stuck with me. How would I know what it felt like to work in a factory? Thankfully, I would never find out, and I am grateful my mother gave me no specific details.

Two nights a week, my mother came home from her factory job, ate dinner with my brother, father and me, and took the Archer Avenue bus downtown for her classes.

I know she had books. I remember her practicing typing on an old typewriter she had borrowed from my Aunt Bernice, though her slow “click-click” did not sound promising. Was she afraid of failure? I don’t know. She never talked about it and no one was all that interested anyway.

At some point, my mother made another announcement: She had gotten an office job near home and could now walk to work. That was the end of the discussion.

In my adolescent self-absorption, I certainly missed the happiness and pride my mother must have felt when she elevated her status from factory worker to office worker, which she did not only for herself but for all of us. The family should have celebrated my mother’s accomplishment.

As I think about my late mother on Mother’s Day, her return to high school was just one of many courageous acts.

When I got divorced, my mother was a widow living in her bungalow by Midway Airport while I lived in the western suburbs. My ex-husband’s family had always picked her up to drive her to my house for family gatherings.

That was now over. My mother said, "I have to figure out how to drive to your house." She was 80 years old. There was no GPS or cell phone for navigation, just my 4' 11" mother sitting on two cushions driving a Mercury Marquis that my father had bought for himself and that was way too big for her.

She somehow managed to find my house, and came over every week for many months to comfort me in my sadness. I offered to drive to her house but she refused. She wanted to come to me.

I guess she felt gifts would assuage grief and, for reasons completely unknown to me, she started showing up with giant packages of toilet paper. Sometimes when I sit in my living room, I recall her tiny figure walking up my front sidewalk lugging toilet paper in packages almost as big as she was. She would spend Sundays with me, tell me my life would get better and somehow, miraculously, find her way back home despite a few mishaps.

There was a roadblock one Sunday in Oak Park and the police told my mother she had to go around it. As my mother explained it, she drove a few blocks and wound up right in front of the same officer, who again told her she had to find a different route. She told me that she then drove in a different direction but once again ended up right back in front of the same officer, who now scolded her.

When she called to tell me about her adventure, she said, "I was scared but I calmed myself down and told myself I could find my way home. I hope that never happens again. See you next week." A police roadblock would not deter her and I never really appreciated how difficult these weekly treks must have been for her.

Our relationship was complicated, for sure. But my mother's examples of courageous acts went without recognition and she might have thought they had no effect on me.

I am finally saying "thank you" to my mom for teaching me to know with certainty that no matter what, I will always find my way back home.

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